

***After Romance: portrayals of the body in films by  
Catherine Breillat, Claire Denis, and Marina de Van- a  
creative exploration.***

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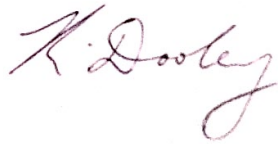
## Abstract

Beginning with Catherine Breillat's controversial film *Romance* (1999), this creative PhD study examines the work of three female directors prominent within the recent French *cinéma du corps* (cinema of the body) mini-movement: Breillat, Claire Denis and Marina de Van. My thesis integrates formal film analysis, enabling practice, and a final exegetical chapter that charts discoveries made through practice. My aim is to produce new knowledge in regards to these directors' portrayals of the body, which can inform my own practice as an Australian writer/director. The eminence of the body as a matter of special interest within female-authored work in France has been particularly visible in the wake of the *cinéma du corps*: disturbing and often horrific films that explore stark portrayals of the human body, sexual debasement, and transgressive urges. Female directors in France take a formidable approach to the representation of the body, as has been noted by several writers and critics, and is exemplified by the three filmmakers who are the subject of this study.

My research is two-pronged: firstly, I provide an analysis of Breillat, Denis and de Van's thematic, stylistic and practical concerns as informed by my own interviews with the directors. Commencing with a description of the status of women directors in the French film industry, I focus on a selection of films produced by the three directors between the years 1999 and 2009. Over a series of chapters I explore areas such as bodily transitions, trauma and foreignness as outlined by theorists such as Gilles Deleuze, Laura Marks and Vivian Sobchack. The second prong of my study involves a research-led film production undertaken as a means to shed new light on the three directors' concerns. By writing and directing a twenty-eight minute film titled *The Sister*, informed by the three filmmakers' work, I produce an artefact that creates new knowledge about their approaches. This film production is practice as research, enabling a thorough investigation of identified concerns through the writing, preproduction, production and postproduction of a short film work. An analysis of the creative process and the final creative artefact produces conclusions from the vantage point of practitioner. In doing so, I create knowledge 'from the inside'. I conclude by considering how the three French directors' portrayals of the body has informed my own practice as a writer/director within an Australian context.

## **Declaration**

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

A handwritten signature in red ink that reads "K. Dooley". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping 'K' and a long, sweeping tail on the 'y'.

Kathleen Dooley

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I have included still images from various films by Catherine Breillat, Marina de Van and Claire Denis in my thesis and I acknowledge the production companies associated with these: Flach Film, CB Films, Mongrel Media, Agat Films & Cie, Wild Bunch, Lazennec & Associés, Why Not Productions, Soudaine Compagnie, Ognon Pictures, arte France, La Sept-Arte, Rézo Films and Tanaïs Productions. Special thanks go to filmmakers Catherine Breillat and Marina de Van, who kindly donated their time to be interviewed as part of my research.

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## Introduction

*Women directors make a lot of films in France today. They do very well. They represent modernity... Now, not only are there women directors, but they also happen to have a real feminine vision. This does not imply that it's a 'pretty' point of view.*

Catherine Breillat (Sklar 1999: 24)

In France in 2009, I watched a film by French director Marina de Van. *Ne te retourne pas* (*Don't Look Back*), her second feature film, is a dark thriller about a woman who loses her identity as her body morphs into that of an unknown other.<sup>1</sup> Shortly afterwards I became acquainted with the work of Catherine Breillat: films such as *À ma soeur* (*For my Sister*, 2001) and *Anatomie de l'enfer* (*Anatomy of Hell*, 2004), both of which foreground themes of identity and alienation. These films were shocking in their graphic portrayal of the body and were unlike anything I had seen from filmmakers in Australia. As a female Australian writer/director I found myself wondering firstly about the directors' motivations concerning these themes, and secondly, about the eminence of the body as a matter of particular interest within female-authored work in France. Faced with such complex, challenging and at times, disturbing images, I considered the possibility that these female writer/directors could have something unique to contribute in this area.

My initial research located de Van's and Breillat's works within the confronting early twenty-first century French cinema trend known collectively as the *cinéma du corps* (Tim Palmer 2006), 'Extreme Cinema' (Martine Beugnet 2007) or the 'New French Extremity' (James Quandt 2004). Quandt questioned whether the trend represented a change in the politics of representation in France: 'a narcissistic response to the collapse of ideology in a society traditionally defined by political polarity and theoretical certitude, perhaps' (2004: 132). Kevin Cooke used the term 'mini-new wave' particularly citing the films of François Ozon as an example of a new generation of filmmakers influenced by the horror films of Roman Polanski

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<sup>1</sup> When presenting French films to the reader I will firstly give the French title, and then the English translation in brackets, except those films with only an English language title.

(2007).<sup>2</sup> Claire Denis was noted as another key contributor to this mini-movement, alongside male peers Gaspar No   and Bruno Dumont. Their films explore stark portrayals of the human body, sexual debasement, and transgressive urges in a fashion that is frequently disturbing and often horrific.

These French directors have contributed to what has now become a global trend, exploring rape, revenge, cannibalism and self-mutilation in works that sit alongside those of international counterparts like Michael Haneke (Austria/France), Lars von Trier (Denmark) and David Cronenberg (USA). Martine Beugnet argues that films such as these have emerged ‘intermittently but persistently in French cinema’, providing an alternative vision of modernity (Beugnet and Ezra 2010: 13). In addition to the stark, shocking subject matter and portrayal of the human body, these films stand out on account of their deployment of specific cinematic techniques, which are designed to disturb the spectator in aggressive and confronting terms. The films show ‘a willingness to address [...] the corporeality of the characters and actors, of the filmic body itself and, by extension, that of the spectator’ (Beugnet 2007: 33). In the case of my first watching of de Van’s *Ne te retourne pas* for example, I was challenged to make sense of frequently blurry, fractured and undecipherable images of the body.

Beginning with the release of Breillat’s controversial film *Romance* (1999), this study focuses on the three female directors prominent within the *cin  ma du corps* mini-movement: Catherine Breillat, Claire Denis and Marina de Van, all of whom have been described as auteurs due to their distinct voices and unique visions. Their work certainly cannot be described as ‘pretty’, in line with Breillat’s comment that opens this thesis. There are several, inter-related reasons for my study of these three female directors. Firstly, France has arguably in global terms the highest ratio of female participation in the film industry. According to the 2011 *Centre national du cin  ma et de l’image anim  e* report, of the 207 French initiative films supported by the government in 2011, 26.6% (fifty-five films) were directed or co-directed by a woman (CNC 2012). This high level of participation means that films directed by women in France are certainly not ‘token’ offerings, but are present across genres and mini-movements (such as the *cin  ma du corps*), tackling the same or similar

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<sup>2</sup> Polanski’s early films with horror/thriller elements include *Knife in the Water* (1962) and *Repulsion* (1965).



issues as their male counterparts. Secondly, female directors in France have taken a formidable approach to the representation of the body, as has been noted by several writers and critics including Gilles Deleuze (2005), René Prédal (2008) and David Vasse (2008).<sup>3</sup> Their tenacity has been particularly visible since the late 1990s when Breillat's *Romance* burst onto the scene, followed by Coralie Trinh Thi and Virginie Despentes' explicit *Baise-Moi (Rape Me, 2000)* a year later. On the subject of female directors in France, Vasse believes it absurd to generalise, but he admits that their approach to sexuality, in particular, 'occurs more bluntly' than that of male counterparts (114). Lastly, a single text that isolates and examines the contributions of female filmmakers within the *cinéma du corps* has not yet been produced. As major contributors to this tendency, the work of Breillat, Denis and de Van provides a special take on the body, specifically in relation to issues of identity, desire, sexuality and violence. Certainly, their films seem to be a significant contrast to the work of many female Australian directors, most of whom do not foreground subject matter related to the body in such a dark or graphic way. Indeed, a movement similar to the transgressive French 'cinema of the body' cannot be said to exist in Australia.

However, I do not wish to suggest that a focus on the body has not impacted upon Australian cinema. In the last two decades, Jane Campion (*The Piano*, [1993]; *In the Cut* [2003]) and Ana Kokkinos (*Head On* [1998]; *The Book of Revelation* [2006]) are but two female filmmakers who have explored representations of the body, desire and identity, alongside male peers such as Rolf de Heer (*Alexandra's Project*, 2003) and John Curran (*Praise*, 1998). In *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (2004), a text that I will later draw upon in my analysis of the work of Denis and de Van, Vivian Sobchack recalls her experience as an embodied viewer of *The Piano*: 'my skin becomes literally and intensely sensitised to the texture and tactility I see figured on the screen' (73). This is an observation that, as with the films of the *cinéma du corps*, calls the corporeality of film characters, actors and the film spectator into question. Female Australian directors have produced work that can be considered similar to their French counterparts in terms of subject matter related to the body, but different in terms of scale (the number of films made) and

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<sup>3</sup> Despite the fact that they generally disclaim gender as influence, contemporary female directors have explored a range of themes that would be considered 'feminist' or 'feminine' according to Anglo-Saxon film criticism, involving representations of the body, desire, identity, women's roles and communities, and the female gaze.

tenacity. The latter point could perhaps be linked to the two countries' different approaches to censorship, past and present.<sup>4</sup>

My research approach is two-pronged: firstly, I provide an analysis of Breillat, Denis and de Van's thematic, stylistic and practical concerns. Commencing with an investigation into the status of women directors in the French film industry, this study will examine each director's approach to the representation of the body, desire and identity. I will focus on several films produced by these filmmakers that reside amidst the tradition of the *cinéma du corps* (1999-2009). The choice of films I consider key are sorted by either author or theme, without aspiring to provide an exhaustive catalogue of the three filmmakers' output.<sup>5</sup> The scope of this thesis means that some works have received only passing mention, such as Breillat's 2002 mockumentary *Sex is Comedy* and Denis's *Vendredi Soir (Friday Night, 2002)*. In terms of stylistic concerns, I will examine the directors' choices in regards to shot framing, staging and choreography, design, editing and use of sound. I spoke directly to Catherine Breillat and Marina de Van in the course of my research, and I will refer to these extensive and revealing interviews undertaken in June 2011 throughout my thesis (see appendices E and F for full transcripts of these interviews).<sup>6</sup>

The second prong of my study moves into the arena of creative research. As a filmmaker looking for alternative approaches to representing the body, I have embarked on my own film production: a practical project that explores the identified approaches from my position as an Australian film writer/director. This creative process has helped me to explore thematic and stylistic concerns 'from the inside', and has provided an opportunity to make discoveries through practice. The resulting twenty-eight minute film, *The Sister*, functions as an artifact enabling further

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<sup>4</sup> Films in Australia are classified according to a ratings code managed by the Australian Classification Board (ACB). Films in France have to be granted a visa by the Ministry of Culture upon the recommendation of the Commission for Film Classification (*Commission de classification cinématographique*). It would seem that French regulators are much more liberal than their Australian counterparts in regards to depictions of sex and violence on screen. For example, Breillat's film *À ma soeur!* (2001), which depicts teenage sex and rape, received a '12' rating (forbidden for under 12s) in France, whereas it was rated 'R' (restricted to those over 18) in Australia. ([http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0243255/parentalguide?ref=tt\\_str\\_y\\_pg](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0243255/parentalguide?ref=tt_str_y_pg), accessed 16 June 2013.)

<sup>5</sup> For filmographies of Breillat, Denis and de Van, see Appendix G.

<sup>6</sup> A large part of my personal interview with Breillat (the original French version) appears in issue 87:2 of *The French Review* (Dooley, 2013). I will quote from this publication, as opposed to the full English translation attached as appendix E to this thesis, when possible. All translations to English are my own.

discussion of the three directors' works. By considering the filmmaking process and the resultant work in relation to my previously established practice, I answer the following question: How can these directors' approaches to the portrayal of the body inform my practice as a writer/director in an Australian context? The film production is practice as research, enabling the forming of conclusions in regards to identified thematic and stylistic concerns through the pre-production, production and post-production of a short film work.

In *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts* (2009), Hazel Smith and Roger Dean refer to the OECD definition of research: 'creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of humanity, culture and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new applications' (2009: 7). They then build upon this definition to define research in the context of artistic practice. According to their definitions, my practical project is research-led, in that I set out to devise and produce a film with particular theoretical concepts and observed practices (as outlined in Chapters One to Four). On the other hand, in the sense that the outcome of this creative project could not be predetermined, the thesis is also practice-led. In an attempt to further clarify the terms of my research, I have adopted the terms 'research-led production' and 'production-led research', which describe the interdependency of both research elements (film and written thesis) and the specificity of my creative project. The undertaking of the second prong of my research was emergent and complex, involving many stages (scriptwriting, preproduction, production, and postproduction) and collaboration with many people (actors, crew members) during which time my role as writer/director/researcher involved a high level of reflexivity.

Thinking outside of the context of academic research, I assume that many filmmakers have been influenced by the work of Denis, Breillat, and/or de Van, both consciously and unconsciously. My research-led production/production-led research differs, however, in the explicit attention paid to the concerns of these directors, in the documenting of my methodology and in my discussion and evaluation of the final creative product. In the context of creative writing, Jeri Kroll suggests that practice-led research achieves three goals related to conventional forms of research. Firstly, 'the research proceeds by and for the practice', secondly, 'the research

proceeds through practice in order to produce a creative product', and thirdly, 'the research proceeds before/during/after practice, aided by ideas generated by practice, in order to produce new knowledge' (Kroll 2008: 9). I believe that my film project also achieves these goals. By undertaking research in both conventional and creative formats, my project aims to illuminate information, not just about these directors' concerns, but about the creative process itself. With reference to the OECD definition of research noted earlier, Kroll makes the point that 'knowledge can be embodied in the creative work and the exegesis individually, in the combination of the creative and critical as a whole, or in an integration of the two' (9). My thesis involves the integration of formal film analysis (a starting point), enabling practice, which is then explored further in a final exegetical chapter. Screenwriting practices have been undertaken as a means of exploring story and character, while production techniques have enabled a close inspection of the relationship between performer, cast, crew and screen space. In effect, I have investigated practices of three French women's film production in an Australian context. The completed work has the tangible outcome of being a vehicle for critical discourse on the concerns of Breillat, Denis and de Van, and on my own concerns as an Australian writer/director.

While I am not aware of any creative projects on these directors, there is significant research on the subject of female directors in France, and on Breillat, Denis and de Van in particular. Carrie Tarr and Brigitte Rollet's *Cinema and the Second Sex* (2001) provides a comprehensive overview of work produced by French female directors in the 1980s and 1990s, largely sorted by film content and theme. This follows on from Françoise Audé's *Ciné-modèles, Cinéma d'elles* (1981) on female filmmaking from the 1960s to 1980s; both broad studies in comparison to my own focused examination of issues pertaining to the portrayal of the body in the work of three directors. David Vasse's *Le nouvel âge du cinéma d'auteur français* (2008) covers twenty-first century work in a broad fashion, whereas Martine Beugnet's *Cinema and Sensation: French film and the Art of Transgression* (2007) focuses more specifically on films related to the *cinéma du corps*. More recently, Tim Palmer's *Brutal Intimacy: Analysing Contemporary French Cinema* (2011) also takes particular issue with representations of the body, whilst a special issue of the journal *Studies in French Cinema* (vol. 12:3, 2012) focuses specifically on women's filmmaking in France between 2000 and 2010. There are also several auteur-

orientated texts related to the individual filmmakers: *Claire Denis* (Beugnet [2004], Mayne [2005]), *Catherine Breillat: un cinéma du rite et de la transgression* (Vasse and Breillat [2004]) and articles on Marina de Van (Palmer [2006], [2010]), to which I will refer over the course of this thesis. As noted, a definitive study that isolates and examines the contributions of female filmmakers within the *cinéma du corps* has yet to be published.

Taking my cue from Emma Wilson, who believes it vital ‘to move beyond auteurist studies and more thematic and genre-based approaches to women's film-making...and still account for such film-making as distinct’ (2005: 218), I have sought to detach myself from arguments about inherent gender difference, and rather, to define the work of the three filmmakers according to their portrayals of the body on screen. This is not intended to be a study of gender difference in relation to commercial or critical success in the French industry, but rather an attempt to explore common strategies amongst the three filmmakers. While female filmmakers in France resist labelling as a subgroup, I believe that it is premature to discount their sex as an influence and I therefore agree with Wilson who writes that ‘...there are risks with such gender-blindness within an industry which has been until so recently dominated by men and entrenched in masculinist perspectives’ (2005: 218). My approach has been to read the films studied as films ‘by women’, considering female positioning in the film industry and wider community, but not as ‘women’s films’, a label that has in the past been too narrowly associated with specifically defined ideologies.

### **A snap shot of the French film industry**

As we progress through the second decade of the twenty-first century, the French film industry is without doubt the strongest in Europe, holding France’s position as ‘the leader of the alternative to the monopoly’, as declared by Daniel Toscan du Plantier, chairman of Unifrance (quoted in Lanzoni 2004: 356). As previously stated, a record breaking 272 feature-length films received approval and support from the French government organisation *Centre national du cinéma et de l’image animée* (CNC) in 2011, with 207 of these being ‘French initiative films’; that is, films fully or predominantly produced by French associates. The same year saw automatic support for feature film projects total an impressive €360 million, and aid allocated for selective support reached €242 million. In addition to automatic and selective

funding from the CNC, French feature films receive funding from various French and European TV stations, such as Canal +, ARTE and TF1. Other forms of support include the SOFICA tax shelter to aid production, established to strengthen links between the worlds of film and finance. In 2011, the average feature film budget was €5.45 million, slightly lower than that of the previous year. In line with Australian trends, the first decades of the twenty-first century have seen a continued polarisation of film budgets in France (studio films made with large budgets or alternatively, very low budget independent projects), which, along with influence of megaplex cinema exhibition practices, has affected the ability of feature films to be made, find success, and find an audience.

Unlike in Australia, the French film industry's domestic audience is strong. According to the CNC report, 2011 saw 216.63 million cinema admission tickets sold in France, a rise of 4.7% from 2010 (2012). This was the best cinema attendance since 1966, and marked a considerable rise in the average of the last five years. As in 2010, women accounted for more admissions (54.3%) than men (45.7%), with the comedy genre continuing to draw the largest audience share. More than half of French cinema audiences are aged over thirty-five (54.9% in 2011) and more than one third are aged fifty years or older (33.6% in 2011); it is this final statistic that perhaps suggests a demand for more diverse and age-appropriate storytelling.

### **Women's participation in the twenty-first century**

As also previously mentioned, of the 207 French initiative films supported in 2011, 26.6% (fifty-five films) were directed or co-directed by a woman. This figure was a new high for French female directors, up from Carrie Tarr and Brigitte Rollet's figure of 13.7% for the period 1990-99 and Katherine Ince's figure of 14.4% for the period 2000-2006 (2008: 279). These productions included new films by seasoned directors such as Brigitte Rouan (unreleased at the time of this writing) and Noémie Lvovsky (*Camille redouble* [*Camille Rewinds*, 2012]), as well as a high percentage of first films. Ince points out that these first time directors may 'informally constitute a mature sector of the industry', as many have come with a wealth of experience as actresses or writers prior to directing (2008: 278).<sup>7</sup> If industry figures were not

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<sup>7</sup> Recent examples of experienced French actresses who have made their first feature as director include Fanny Ardant (*Cendres et sang* [*Ashes and Blood*, 2009]) and Sandrine Bonnaire (*J'enrage de son absence* [*Maddened by his Absence*, 2012]).

enough to indicate the healthy inclusion of women filmmakers in the French film industry, one might also look at the awards given out at the annual French Césars, the national equivalent to the American Academy Awards. The César for *Meilleur Premier Film* (Best Debut Film) has been won by a female director three times in the 2000s,<sup>8</sup> with the César for *Meilleur Film* (Best Film) awarded to two female directors: Agnès Jaoui for *Le Goût des autres* (*The Taste of Others*) in 2001 and Pascale Ferran for *Lady Chatterley* in 2007.

It is evident therefore that, in global terms, France has arguably the highest ratio of female participation in the film industry in regards to women directing films, a situation described by Tarr and Rollet as ‘a source of both delight and despair’: delight at the high numbers of participation, and despair at the lack of explicit engagement with feminist ideas in a country influenced by such pioneers of feminist thinking as Simone de Beauvoir (2001: 1). From an Anglo-Saxon perspective, it is difficult to imagine female directors largely disclaiming their gender as an influence on their work, but this is in fact the case in France, a position that Tarr and Rollet believe stems from principles of universalism left over from the French Revolution, with the result that issues of gender equality, much like issues of class and race, have been obscured by the idea of the filmmaker’s powerful individual voice (5). Moreover, this tactic of focused integration rather than proclamation of gender as influence does not appear to have impeded filmmakers’ success, as evidenced by the numerous French female directors such as Coline Serrau, Chantal Akerman and Josiane Balasko, all of whom are present in the mainstream.

While Australian cinephiles may be familiar with the work of seasoned French auteurs such as Breillat or Agnès Varda, it is likely that their knowledge is limited to the small number of films distributed outside of France, many of which could be labeled as ‘art house’. This general lack of awareness comes despite the fact that feature film productions helmed by female directors in France greatly outnumber the total annual number of Australian features. Even considering the difference in population (France has approximately three times the population of Australia) the

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<sup>8</sup> The César for *Meilleur Premier Film* was awarded to Julie Bertuccelli for *Depuis qu’Otar est parti* (*Since Otar Left*) in 2004, to long-time actress but first-time writer and director Yolande Moreau for *Quand la mer monte* (*When the Sea Rises*) in 2005, and to the long-established actress and writer Isabelle Mergault in 2007, for *Je vous trouve très beau* (*You Are So Beautiful*).

number of female filmmakers at work is notably uneven.<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Romney notes that there are currently ‘a host of French women directors who manage consistently to get features made and to evolve a distinctive voice from film to film – something still unimaginable in Britain’(44), and, I would add, in Australia, with perhaps only Campion, Kokkinos or Gillian Armstrong regularly adding to their considerable body of work. This has not always been the case in France, however, and I shall now turn to look at the emergence of women directors in the French industry.

### **Female directors in France: a historical overview**

Female filmmakers have played an important role in the French industry since the early days of cinema, although French history books often overlook, undervalue and marginalise their contribution. Alice Guy Blaché, former secretary to Léon Gaumont, head of Gaumont studios, directed hundreds of silent films around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, although little was done to preserve these works and most were subsequently lost or destroyed. Germaine Dulac was also an important contributor to experimental and visionary work produced early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as described by Levitin, Plessis and Raoul (2003). My research has not uncovered other women directors of equal influence until the 1950s when Agnès Varda began making films, yet there is some disagreement about whether Varda, as ‘mother of the New Wave’, has received the historical recognition she deserves.<sup>10</sup> Geneviève Sellier (2008) explores this lack of recognition, charting Varda’s career from her first film *La Pointe-Courte* (*The Short Point*, 1955) to *Cléo de 5 à 7* (*Cleo From 5 To 7*, 1962), the only female-directed film officially regarded as part of the *Nouvelle Vague* output.

It is not until the 1970s that participation noticeably increases, with thirty-seven women (10% of all talent) directing a first film within this decade (Hayward 2005: 247). Notable directors of this period include Nelly Kaplan, Margarite Duras and Varda, all of whom experimented with models for counter-cinema in the exploration of different narrative conventions, cinematic language, and/or concepts of identity. As a director influenced by feminist ideas that exploded in the wake of the events of

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<sup>9</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics and Wikipedia figures (accessed 20/9/10) put Australia’s and France’s population at approximately 22.5 million and 65 million respectively.

<sup>10</sup> Jacqueline Audry had success as a commercial filmmaker post-World War II, and is cited by Tarr and Rollet as the only female feature film director working in 1949, although I have found few details concerning her work.



May 1968, Duras is described as being in ‘constant opposition to patriarchal filmmaking practices’ (Gunther: 16). It should be noted that the films of these female filmmakers were often produced on much lower budgets than those of their male counterparts, and that such films were of a highly experimental nature. For example, Duras’ 1972 film *Nathalie Granger* received ten million francs from the CNC at a time when the average sum offered was forty to fifty million (Gunther: 16). To briefly address the subject of feminism in France, I would note that the French feminist movement of the 1970s saw the creation of various groups interested in pursuing women’s rights, promoting female filmmakers and exploring a range of new theoretical approaches to women’s creative voice, which led to the establishment of the annual Creteil International Festival of Women’s Films.<sup>11</sup> By the end of the 1970s, however, the social and academic landscape in France meant that feminist concerns were no longer seen as legitimate and female academics and filmmakers alike distanced themselves from the idea of gender as an influence.<sup>12</sup>

The 1980s was a difficult decade for filmmakers working in France, especially so for those working at the margins. Financial issues could account for the move by some female directors, most of whom had previously displayed little interest in the popular genre films typically produced by their male counterparts, into mainstream French cinema. Popular films by directors such as Diane Kurys, Serreau and Akerman made their mark at the box office. Conversely, to take Catherine Breillat as an example of a director working on more personal, non-genre films, one can note a period of limited output. After a promising beginning to her directing career with *Une vraie jeune fille* (*A Real Young Girl*, 1976) and *Tapage nocturne* (*Nocturnal Uproar*, 1979), financial difficulties meant a nine-year gap until the release of *36 Fillette* (*Virgin*, 1988). René Prédal cites 1986 as an important year for women filmmakers as many female-authored films appeared in the official French selection at the Cannes Film Festival and, for the first time, the same number of women and men

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<sup>11</sup> The Creteil International Festival of Women’s Films is now in its thirty-fifth year, these days functioning as a cultural showcase rather than an event foregrounding practical issues for women filmmakers.

<sup>12</sup> One example of this would include the closure of the Women’s Studies Program at the University of Paris VIII by the Minister of the Universities, Alice Saunier-Séité in 1980. Hayward also makes the point that there was no cross-over between feminist and film theory in France, in sharp contrast to work done in Great Britain and the United States (2005: 225).

were admitted into the national film school *la FEMIS (École nationale supérieure des métiers de l'image et du son)* (2008).

The socialist François Mitterrand presidency (1981-95) brought substantial social transformation and Edith Cresson was elected the first female Prime Minister in 1991. The 1990s saw many first films by female directors as well as continued output by their more experienced predecessors. Balasko's 1995 hit comedy *Gazon Maudit (French Twist)* brought lesbianism into the mainstream, notably followed in 1999 by Catherine Corsini's *La Nouvelle Eve (The New Eve)*. By the end of the decade, women directors appeared to have somewhat successfully integrated themselves into the French film industry. Sellier cites a figure of twenty-four films made by seventeen women filmmakers between 1990 and 2000 that exceeded 400,000 cinema spectators in France, qualifying them as a mainstream success (quoted in Célestin et al. 2003: 214).

### **Recent trends**

In his 2005 article 'After GATT: Has the Revival of French Cinema Ended?' Jonathan Buchsbaum comments on a number of early twenty-first century French government reports exploring the future of the film production and distribution in France, all of which noted that the biggest challenge was the 'preservation and promotion of diversity, at all levels of the industry' (2005: 40). Looking at the work produced in France over the last decade, it is fair to say that in terms of subject matter, and despite financial considerations, French filmmakers have met this challenge; as such, it is hard to categorise such a diversity of themes, styles and approaches, even when reducing the list to the (many) films directed by female makers. Looking at works in this category, Ince (2008) observes a step back from overly political concerns in favour of more personal stories, while Wilson describes a move 'to chart relations of ambiguity, of troubled boundaries and unstable performance' (2005: 219). Some female filmmakers, including Breillat and Denis (both of whom were honoured with retrospectives of their work in the UK in 1999 and 2000 respectively) continue to take what Rachel Ritterbusch describes as a 'serious, "artsy" approach' to their subject matter, often focusing on female sexuality and issues associated with gender (2008: 69). Other directors categorised in this way have moved into the mainstream (notably Anne Fontaine with *Coco Avant Chanel [Coco Before Chanel]* in 2009), joining seasoned players such as Serreau and

Balasko. Ince posits that ‘female subjectivity, rather than feminist politics, is now the domain in which the most urgent questions are asked’, citing films by Siegrid Alnoy, Laetitia Masson and Breillat as evidence of a ‘new focus on the complexity and difficulty of women’s individual experiences’ (2008: 285). There also exists a younger generation of female filmmakers, such as Mia Hansen-Løve and Rebecca Zlotowski, who are more interested in focusing on marginal characters and issues of identity.

In her 2003 dissertation entitled *The Quiet Revolution*, Corinne Oster describes the status of female directors in France as involving a ‘double dynamic of integration and difference’, and suggests that the acceptance of female directors’ marginal stories by French audiences implies a repositioning of the centre of the mainstream (6). On the French film industry at large, Palmer (2009) notes a reorganisation of the industry to utilise transmedia and transnational funding models, a return to 1990s subject matter such as *banlieue cinema* (depictions of the suburbs), a blending of high and low art forms, as well as a focus on graphic depiction of the body labelled *cinéma du corps*. He also suggests that the large number of women working in the industry has meant a shift in visual, narrative and multi-sensory strategies of representation and audience engagement, as well as more recognition of female auteurs. Certainly, female filmmakers are working across a range of budgets, in different film and video formats, with a wealth of background experience including formal film school training, previous lives as writers or actresses and/or decades of commercial feature film production. David Vasse is right, then, when he concludes that ‘to deduce a movement or a unifying slogan that summarises...is therefore absurd’ (2008: 115). This reality, as well as the need to refine the scope of my project to a size manageable for this thesis, has resulted in the decision to focus on three directors whose work exemplifies the *cinéma du corps*: Catherine Breillat, Claire Denis and Marina de Van.

## **Biographies**

One of the few directors who has proclaimed her gender as an influence on her filmmaking, Catherine Breillat (born in 1948) has made twelve feature length films since her first, *Une vraie jeune fille*, in 1976. With a background as a novelist, many of her films have been based on her own controversial books, including *Romance* (1999), her international breakthrough film which took over a million dollars at the

American box office. Described as ‘la cinéaste la plus “dangereuse” du cinéma français (the most dangerous French filmmaker)’, by the journal *Cahiers du Cinéma* in 1991, Breillat has spent her career making films that explore female subjectivity and alienation from the body (Vasse 2008:115). Her films foreground what Liz Constable describes as ‘the numbing self-consciousness that can become a prime mediator in young women's dilemmas of desire’, and ‘shame as a differentially gendered affective experience in its distribution and its reverberations within women's explorations of sexual desire’ (2004: 677). In other words, Breillat’s work explores notions of shame that are associated with sexual activity, and how these notions affect women’s sexual agency, with a particular focus on the experience of the adolescent and younger woman.

Born in Paris in 1948, Claire Denis was raised across colonial Africa (Burkina Faso, Somalia, Senegal and Cameroon) where her father was a French civil servant. This early life experience as an outsider greatly influenced her work, starting with her debut film *Chocolat* (1988), which explored African colonialism. Since winning critical acclaim with this film (as well as a nomination for a César for Best First Film), Denis has gone on to produce close to a dozen features including *Beau Travail* (*Good Work*, 1999) and the more recent *White Material* (2009), which saw a return to themes related to foreignness and alienation in an African setting. A graduate of the French film school *L’IDHEC* (*Institut des hautes études cinématographiques*), now known as *la FÉMIS*, she has been likened by critics to American directors David Lynch and Jim Jarmusch. In addition to her formal film schooling, her entry to the film industry involved working as a first assistant to directors such as Jacques Rivette, Costa-Gavras, Jarmusch and Wim Wenders.

Marina de Van was born in France in 1971 and first studied philosophy at the Sorbonne University in Paris, before later moving into filmmaking. Since her 1996 graduation from the elite French film school *la FÉMIS*, an institution that has ‘recently encouraged more provocative filmmaking methods, in particular an emphasis upon a stark treatment of the body on-screen, in its filmmaking exercises’ (Palmer 2006: 24), the writer/director has also had a significant career as an actress, often portraying nervous, sexually non-conformist, and/or perverse women. Prior to making her first feature film *Dans ma peau* (*In My Skin*, 2002), in which she plays the central character Esther, de Van collaborated with François Ozon as writer on

*Under the Sand* (2000) and *8 Femmes* (*8 Women*, 2002), and it could be argued that both directors share a common interest in exploring issues of the body, identity and desire. Whilst de Van does not consider herself a ‘feminine’ director, her work is interesting in its strong focus on women in crisis and the physical manifestation of memory and trauma on their skin.

## **Structure**

Chapters One to Three of my dissertation are concerned with an exploration of the thematic and stylistic concerns of Breillat, Denis and de Van, with reference to a selection of their films produced between 1999 and 2009. As well as analysing the materialisation of themes related to the body, identity and desire, I will explore the manner in which material is presented, via framing, camera movement, mise-en-scène and editing. The first chapter, sub-titled ‘Woman Becoming’, examines representations of the body in the recent films of Breillat, starting with the director’s 1999 work *Romance*, to the more recent *Une vieille maîtresse* (*An Old Mistress*, 2007) and telefilm *Barbe Bleue* (*Blue Beard*, 2009). As the title of my thesis emphasises, I regard *Romance* as marking a significant turning point in terms of its thematic and stylistic approaches to representation of the body. While much has been written about this film, I nonetheless review this work and offer my own account of Breillat’s groundbreaking representations of the body before moving on to analyse her follow up films, *À ma soeur* and *Anatomie de l’enfer*. When using the term ‘woman becoming’, I am referring to the development of awareness of patriarchal systems and expectations of female sexuality, and the bodily experience attained in the achievement of this awareness. As such, I will explore Breillat’s films with reference to the work of philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1982). My exploration of this director’s work is also informed by the writings of Julia Kristeva in relation to the concept of *le temps des femmes* (women’s time), as I will explain with reference to the film *Anatomie de l’enfer*. Looking at *À ma soeur*, I will refer to Simone de Beauvoir’s writings on female adolescent shame. As with the chapters to follow, I will utilise these concepts as a means to explore the situations and circumstances depicted, whilst maintaining a focus on textual analysis as my primary research tool.

Chapter Two, ‘The Unstable, Fragmented Body’, examines the two films *Dans ma peau* (2002) and *Ne te retourne pas* (2009) directed by Marina de Van (the director’s entire theatrically released feature film output to date) alongside two films by Denis.

I have isolated *Trouble Every Day* (2001) and *L'Intrus (The Intruder)*, (2004) from other works by Denis due to the graphic imagery associated with portrayals of the body in these works, and the stylistic approaches to camera and mise-en-scène featured within, much of which finds parallels with the work of the younger director. With reference to Steven Shaviro's *The Cinematic Body* (1993), I will explore the frequently irrational, out of control and mutating bodies featured within these confronting works. Considering Vivian Sobchack's writings on 'self-touching' (2004) and Laura Marks' theory of 'haptic visuality' (2000), both of which concern the relationship between film subject and viewing subject, I will investigate how these films engage the audience using a sense of touch, as well as sight and sound. To further explore mise-en-scène in these works, I shall look to Gilles Deleuze's writings on transitory backdrops (what he describes as 'any-space-whatever' [1986]), and Marc Augé's 'non-spaces' (2008). As I will go on to argue, within these films, Denis and de Van have subverted traditional patterns of film viewing by capturing fragmented close-up images of the body, a style of representation that is explicitly linked to their unstable protagonists.

The third chapter, 'Foreign Bodies and the Move Towards the Other', examines the concept of foreignness as articulated within the film texts by Denis *White Material* (2009) and *Beau Travail* (1999), both of which explore conflict in African settings, and in the urban Parisian drama *35 Rhums (35 Shots of Rum)*, (2008). In considering these films, all of which feature multi-ethnic casts, I will explore notions of post-colonial shame, trauma, and the representation of race. To aid in my investigation of these themes, I will look to Richard Dyer's work on the representation of whiteness (1997) and to Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's key text *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (1994). I shall also refer to the writings of Ann E. Kaplan, and to philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, who is a key influence on Denis's work.

Having isolated the thematic and stylistic concerns of the three directors, Chapter Four focuses on their practical approaches and working methods, attempting to isolate the specifics of the directors' relationships with cast, crew and the material that will become the film itself. I look for connections between themes such as the unstable body (to take Denis's and de Van's work as example) and the practicalities of writing, preproduction and production. In doing so, I will isolate a series of practical approaches to be explored in my own short film project.

The twenty eight-minute film, *The Sister* constitutes the fifth chapter of this thesis, and should be viewed after reading Chapters One to Four. (A DVD is attached in this section.) Then finally, the sixth, exegetical chapter details my attempts to further explore Breillat, Denis and de Van's concerns by means of this research-led production. Here, I aimed to further my analysis of the directors' works by undertaking a practical exercise. By analysing the filmmaking process that I followed, and then the completed short film, I summarise discoveries that will not only inform my future work as writer/director, but can provide a point of reference for other Australian filmmakers looking for an alternative approach to representations of identity, the body and desire. Through the combination of conventional and creative research practices, the completed thesis aims to provide the reader with an insight into the specificity of work produced by this particular group of female directors. In accordance with Kroll's model, new knowledge is 'embodied in a creative-critical package', to be evaluated and 'disseminated to the culture' (2008: 10).